

# **WOMEN IN LAO MORALITY TALES**

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A Model Lao Woman

## Introduction

One approach to looking at the status of women in society is to study the cultural construction of gender in literature. The portrayal of female characters in stories or poems can give useful insights into the cultural values and norms that provide the context in which gender relationships are performed. Society's expectations and judgments of women are often reflected in morality tales, which are written as much to instruct readers on socially acceptable behavior as to entertain them.

The purpose of this paper is to make some general comments on the portrayal of girls and women in Lao morality tales. My reasons for researching this topic were a personal interest in reading Lao folktales and translating these works into English so they may be shared with others interested in Lao culture or women's issues, and an interest in helping Lao-American youth better understand their heritage and thereby ameliorate conflict between generations.

My selection of sources is humble. I am using four works: one pamphlet and three folktales. The pamphlet, written by Somjin (also known as Pierre) Nginn, the president of the Laotian Literary Committee, and published in 1967, clearly shows its instructive intent in its title, The Story of Nang Pawadi-A Model Lao Woman.<sup>1</sup> The folktales were compiled by Kideng Phawnkasermasuk and published by the Institute of Research on National Art and Literature, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Somjin Nginn, The Story of Nang Pawadi-A Model Lao Woman (Vientiane: Editions du Comite Litteraire, 1967). Subsequent footnotes concerning this work refer to my translation.

Lao People's Democratic Republic. Both the author and the compiler are men.

Although there is a wealth of elegant and elaborate traditional Lao literature, I have concentrated on recent sources because the language is simpler and the women in the morality tales are more realistic than the goddesses and princesses portrayed as heroines in the Lao classics. Translations of the four works follow this commentary.

## Setting

The settings for the stories range from rural Laos "long ago," "once upon a time," and "in a former time" (as in the three folktales), to urban Vientiane in the 1960s (as in the story of Nang Pawadi).

All of the stories set the woman, married or single, in the context of a home and family. She functions as a wife or daughter. Most of her activity occurs around the house, where she is busy cleaning, cooking or weaving at her loom. She makes short forays into the greater world-to the market, to the temple, to work in the fields-but she always returns home.

Going outside the home can be a source of danger. Miss Fair drowns in a pond<sup>2</sup>; the young Nang Pawadi is hit by lightning in the forest, and later, as an adult, she wanders off to the festival at

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<sup>2</sup> "Miss Dark, Miss Fair," in Lao Folktales Book I (Vientiane: Institute of Research on National Art and Literature, 1989), pp. 82-86. Subsequent footnotes concerning this work refer to my translation.

That Luang and to Udorn in Thailand. Travel also brings sickness and pain. "It is better to remain safe at home," is the message of these stories.

That a woman's proper place is in the home is also apparent in the story of "Miss Chicken Manure, Miss Duck Manure."<sup>3</sup> While versing his daughters in social etiquette, a father warns against going from house to house to gossip,<sup>4</sup> and teaches them about "extending the ladder to receive guests." The Lao house, built on stilts and accessible only by a ladder that can be withdrawn or extended, is comment on social contact. More often a woman awaits visitors at home than goes visiting. On the other hand, Little Sister Imom chooses to set up her loom near the road, where passing strangers, such as hill tribespeople or Vietnamese, can advise her on her weaving.<sup>5</sup>

A woman carries out domestic duties (cleaning, sweeping, tidying, weaving) in the home and its surrounding yard, which is associated with images of abundance: chickens, pigs, trees heavy with fruit.<sup>6</sup> No mention is made in these stories of the source of drinking or bathing water, or of the woman's task of transporting it for use at home.

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<sup>3</sup> "Miss Chicken Manure, Miss Duck Manure," in Lao Folktales Book I (Vientiane: Institute of Research on National Art and Literature, 1989), pp. 152-156. Subsequent footnotes concerning this work refer to my translation.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

## Characters

### Description of Women's Physical Features

In contrast to classic Lao literature, in which the outstanding characteristic of any heroine is her amazing beauty,<sup>7</sup> morality tales emphasize a woman's actions rather than her appearance. Physical descriptions are short, nonspecific and literal. Whether Nang Pawadi is beautiful, homely, or somewhere in between, her actions decide her fate. According to Nginn:

The physical beauty of human beings is not so important if they do not keep the teachings of the Dharma constant in their hearts. The person who has a beautiful appearance but lacks the precepts of the Dharma can not win against those who follow the Dharma but have a homely appearance.<sup>8</sup>

Nginn's comments also hold true for the sisters in "Miss Dark, Miss Fair." Here, the parents have high hopes for the more beautiful fair-skinned elder daughter, but soon realize that because of her beauty she has neglected the cultivation of more important personal traits, such as diligence and patience; she dies an unhappy death, while the younger dark-skinned sister is rewarded with a husband and a family.

A woman's skin color is the only physical feature that receives specific attention. Nang Pawadi is described as having the tan skin color of a sadeua flower. The daughter of a rich man is as "fair and beautiful as a peeled egg," an image of smooth,

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<sup>7</sup> Anatole-Roger Peltier, Le Roman Classique Lao, Vol. 152 (Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient, 1988), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Nang Pawadi, p. 36.

white, symmetrical beauty.<sup>9</sup>

### Description of Women's Personalities

The heroines of morality tales, whether daughters, wives, or sisters, are devout, well-mannered, hardworking, selfless, tolerant, and respectful. The ideal Lao woman possesses all of these traits.

### *Living according to the Dharma*

The most important thing about Nang Pawadi, writes Nginn, "is that she is a person who keeps the precepts of the Dharma constant in her heart."<sup>10</sup> As a little girl she went to the temple "to listen to the preaching of the Dharma" and to make merit. She becomes a Buddhist nun for a brief period, and throughout the rest of her life Nang Pawadi continues to practice *karuna* and *metta* in her kindness to step-siblings, beggars, war refugees and "those poor who must work from dawn to dark to make a living." Likewise, the rich man's daughter is described as a humble girl with "a heart that followed the Dharma"<sup>11</sup> and as someone who admires this quality

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<sup>9</sup> "The Rich Man's Daughter," in Lao Folktales Book I (Vientiane: Institute of Research on National Art and Literature, 1989), pp. 92-101. Subsequent footnotes concerning this work refer to my translation.

This description is reminiscent of the final actions in the *ba sii* ceremony, when the master of blessings opens a hard-boiled egg, finds it "perfect" inside, and declares it a good omen for the ceremony.

<sup>10</sup> Nang Pawadi, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> "The Rich Man's Daughter," p. 25.

in a prospective mate.

In "Miss Dark, Miss Fair" and "Miss Chicken Manure, Miss Duck Manure," there are no references to the teachings of the Buddha, but there are vivid contrasts between the behavior of the "bad" elder sisters and the "good" younger sisters. The elder sisters exemplify sloth, dishonesty, and vanity. The younger sisters are paragons of industriousness, generosity, tolerance, and forgiveness. In both stories the good sisters are rewarded with husband, children, and happy lives, while the bad sisters suffer a slovenly home or even death.

*Gentle, sweet-mannered*

In addition to following the Buddhist path, daughters and wives are also instructed in "gentle, sweet manners," such as smiling radiantly which will endear them to others. The widowed father of Nang Imom instructs his daughters on "proper speech, sitting politely, being cautious," being hospitable to guests, and abstaining from gossip.<sup>12</sup> The mother of Miss Fair tries to teach her daughter about diligence but is unsuccessful.

Proper speech and knowing "low from high"<sup>13</sup> are linked in the story about Nang Pawadi, who explains why she uses the submissive pronoun *khanaawy* rather than *khaawy* (used among equals) when talking with her husband or his students and proteges. In her speech she defers to her husband, humbling herself especially in

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<sup>12</sup> "Miss Chicken Manure," p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Nang Pawadi, p. 34.



front of children who must be taught to respect their fathers, uncles and grandfathers.<sup>14</sup> Knowing her position in life is important to Nang Pawadi. She also demonstrates a sense of her social responsibility by distributing alms to those below her and by forgoing pretentious behavior namely, driving around in cars, dressing in strange fashions.

Having proper manners also means knowing when to keep quiet. Nang Pawadi says nothing to vex her husband or neighbors except during her periodic bouts of insanity. The mistreated younger daughter in "Miss Chicken Manure, Miss Duck Manure" sits quietly and absorbs the undeserved abuse of her father without arguing. The rich man's daughter keeps her criticism of her father's behavior to herself until she cleverly expresses it in an indirect manner and responds to his questions, thereby politely explaining her feelings.

### *Hardworking*

The most recurrent theme running through the stories is how much a woman is respected for her ability to work-farming the fields, or weaving, cleaning, and managing the household. Miss Fair is disdained for not knowing "how to do anything except wear clothes"; this lack of knowledge (not knowing how to make her own skirts) will lead to her demise. Nang Imom's elder sister wastes her time by playing with a monkey rather than following her enthusiastic younger sister's example and preparing the *hai* fields.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

Even the rich man's daughter, whose family can afford servants, is responsible for preparing food and clearing plates.

Today, Nang Pawadi might be considered an overachiever who works and worries herself into a state of mental illness. She rises earlier and works later than her husband; she does the shopping and housework herself (except for scrubbing the floors). She is concerned about her extended family and her husband's proteges (perhaps because she doesn't have children of her own). And even after a critical illness, she is able to remember the exact prices of market goods despite inflation. She sacrifices school and recovery in the hospital to her urgent desire to return home to her work. After all, she says, "We are born with hands and feet to do work, not just to sleep and eat."<sup>15</sup>

### *Selfless*

A woman's work in the home is unpaid and performed for the benefit of others. As their father grew old and weak, the daughters in "Miss Chicken Manure" became "the supporters of the household until they got husbands and families of their own." Working hard to cultivate the *hai* fields, the younger daughter is motivated by her devotion to her father.

She worked for her old weak father, who had taken care of her from the time her head was just the size of an olive. Now that she was grown-up, she wanted to do whatever she could to show gratitude toward her father.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> "Miss Chicken Manure," p. 20.

Likewise, Nang Pawadi thinks only of others. As a young girl, when her brothers grew tired on their way to work in the fields, she carried their tools without complaint. After her marriage, she cares for her husband's family as if it were her own. When presented with news that her in-laws are trying to displace her as their son's wife, she holds her tongue. Always concerned with others, "she did not say or do things that might upset them." Even when she is near having a nervous breakdown, she accepts the problems of others. She is a Lao martyr, thinking more about the happiness of others than is healthy: "Even when Nang Pawadi was in great pain, she was always still worried about others."<sup>17</sup>

#### *Tolerant*

Influenced by Buddhism and an acute sensitivity toward others, Nang Pawadi displays tolerance, another ideal personal quality that surfaces in these stories. She respects people of other religions—even to the point of giving them donations.<sup>18</sup> She upholds the reputations of people of other nationalities and ethnic groups<sup>19</sup> when they are being slandered by others. Similarly, the younger daughter in "Miss Chicken Manure" is tolerant of other ethnic groups, such as Vietnamese and hill tribespeople from whom she takes weaving instructions. Her beautiful woven skirts are the results of such interchanges. Her elder sister, however, is a

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<sup>17</sup> Nang Pawadi, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

bigot who distrusts outsiders and uses them as scapegoats. The daughter of the rich man tolerates socioeconomic differences, seen in her endorsement of the orphan boy.

No matter how poor he is, I will be content to marry him: whether he is wealthy or poor, his status high or low. There is only one way to measure the value of being human-how he follows the Dharma. That is the single and only thing, Papa, by which to measure the value of a human.<sup>20</sup>

*Respectful of elders and husbands*

All of the heroines show the utmost respect for their elders and husbands, yet also manage to hold their own opinions. This is most clear in the case of the younger daughter in "Miss Chicken Manure" who is misjudged by her father. Rather than contradict the false information given to him by her elder sister, the girl suffers silently. Years later, however, her father discovers how hardworking and generous she is when he visits and she welcomes him with genuine devotion, despite their past differences.

Miss Dark feels compassion and retains a tone of respect when she realizes the plight of her older sister, who is stranded naked in a pond. She tries to help her escape without embarrassing her, but the elder sister refuses her help and dies. Miss Dark also displays *kaenggjay* (wanting to avoid imposing on or inconveniencing someone of higher status) for her husband when she remarks that he will be waiting for her at home after dusk.

The rich man's daughter is respectful toward her father even

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<sup>20</sup> "The Rich Man's Daughter," p. 30.

when she knows he is not following the Dharma. But rather than openly confront him, she makes her point in a roundabout manner and only when asked directly does she respond, politely, with her true feelings.

Nang Pawadi devotes her life to her husband, "believing that the husband was a person who must be held in great respect."<sup>21</sup> She displays her respect through her language (choice of pronouns) and her actions, which are also performed with his happiness and comfort in mind. When she discovers her in-laws are planning to disrupt her perfect marriage, she continues to show them respect. Only when she is "crazy" does she act inconsiderately in wandering off, getting angry and speaking harshly. Upon recovering consciousness, her first concern is for her husband and others. She was a woman

who loved and respected her husband as one who respects a father and who accepted staying under his supervision. She never said or did things which might have annoyed others. She did not infringe on the rights of other people . . . <sup>22</sup>

But Nang Pawadi does have the power to disagree with and even criticize her husband. She refuses to change her speech habits or take a servant when he requests her to do so, and she hushes him when he complains about being too busy with other people. Respect shown to others influences but does not completely control a woman's actions.

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<sup>21</sup> Nang Pawadi, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

## Role of Women

As previously mentioned, the morality tales place women in the context of family relationships. Fathers and husbands are vague, undefined characters except for the suitor in the story of "The Rich Man's Daughter." Men are not contrasted to women, except as opposing gender qualities (that is masculine versus feminine) or as opposing characters. The only male-female tension that might be assumed lies between Thaw Somjay and Nang Pawadi-if one interprets her craziness to be a result of her inability to cope with family relationships.

Perhaps because of the didactic nature of these stories, the female characters do not initiate much action in their lives. They do the work that society expects of them. As a result, it often seems that the most interesting female characters are the "bad girls" (including Nang Pawadi when she was in her crazy state). Even so, the "bad girls" indulge themselves in inactivity rather than adventure or unorthodox behavior when they resist society's expectations. Does coming home late after playing with a monkey in the forest constitute deviant behavior from a Lao perspective? The exception is Nang Pawadi, who travels alone all the way to Thailand or wanders alone around the festival at That Luang during her crazy spells-quite a departure from her usual homebody self.

There is not much difference in the role of women in an urban or rural setting aside from the type of work they perform. Village girls weave cloth, cultivate *hai* fields, and take care of livestock, while Nang Pawadi helps look after her husband's career.

But "proper" supportive behavior is expected of all the women.

Rules of prescribed behavior for Lao women have a long history. Khun Borom, the legendary ancestor of the Lao people, is reported to have advised the wives of his seven sons thus:

Go to rest before your husbands, and be always the first to rise; always forestall their commands, do not wait for them to order you to prepare food, fabrics, whatever is necessary to their welfare: be mindful of their servants, watch over the plantations, the gardens.

Whatever you may hear in your home, tell it not beyond your walls, whatever you hear beyond your walls, tell it not in your home.

Suffer the wicked in your house as well as the good; what knowledge you may have of good or evil, think well before you make it known to your husbands, then act according as your heart guides you . . .

When the Kings, your husbands, will have judged or condemned someone, never make it your business to examine their reasons with a view to making them change their mind.

Do not dispose of what belongs to your husband, do not give your love to another man.

And finally, all you, my children, who are human beings, refrain from lying in speaking of your possessions, do not drink spirits to the point of forgetfulness, and do not smoke opium, for these are shameful things. Seek to imitate Pra Put [sic], our Master, who, when he sees a poor man, does not wait for him to beg for alms.<sup>23</sup>

Based on my discussions with Lao women and girls in Honolulu, it seems that the same code of acceptable feminine behavior is held as desirable for females in Lao society today.

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<sup>23</sup> "Testament of Khun Borom," from August Pavie's French translation, in Kingdom of Laos: The Land of the Million Elephants of the White Parasol (Saigon: France-Asie, 1959), pp. 385-386.

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## Miss Dark, Miss Fair

Long ago there was a farm family that had two teenage daughters. The elder sister was called Miss Fair, the younger sister was called Miss Dark. Because the elder sister was light-skinned and had a very beautiful appearance, her father and mother chose the name "Fair" for her. As for the younger sister, who had a darker complexion and an appearance not as beautiful as her elder sister, they chose the name "Dark."

At the time when their daughters were still young, the father and mother were happy and had high hopes for the elder daughter. They thought that because she was a beautiful girl, she would probably get a good husband who would come take care of her parents in their old age. But as the daughters grew older, the parents became worried and concerned about Miss Fair because she was a lazy person who did not know how to do anything.

The mother of these girls was diligent. She wove silk skillfully and learned new things quickly. But Miss Fair didn't know how to do anything except to wear clothes. She didn't know how to weave at the loom. Even though her mother set exercises for her to practice, she would only work for a moment and then wander off. She was already a young woman, but she couldn't even finish making a piece of skirt cloth-not even the threads. As for Miss Dark, the younger sister, she learned how to weave until she was able to surpass her mother in weaving skills.

The young single men in the village saw that Miss Fair was prettier than anyone else, but when they knew that she was so lazy

that you had to wake her three times before she would get up, or that she couldn't weave even one piece of skirt cloth, they walked by, avoiding her. They only came to chat with Miss Dark, the younger sister.

Later on Miss Dark had a young man come to court her, and thus she married before her elder sister. When Miss Dark had gone to live at her in-law's house, there was only Miss Fair, the beauty, at home with her parents. Not even one young man climbed the stairs to visit even though Miss Fair sat outside combing her hair and dressed in fancy clothes.

The sleeping room at home became all grubby and Miss Fair's false hairpiece old and unkept.<sup>1</sup> Miss Fair didn't work at all. At the start of the day, she just dressed herself and sat outside with her legs dangling over the porch to make the young men see her beauty and then drop by to chat. But no one dropped by.

One evening when Miss Fair went to sit on the porch of the house after eating, she heard the *khaen* pipe of a young man coming.<sup>2</sup> She cleared her throat, trying to get attention. At last, however, the sound of the *khaen* pipe got fainter as it went in another direction. Miss Fair became sad and depressed, so she mumbled, complaining to herself:

"Khaen pipe from the south passes by,  
Khaen pipe from the north passes by.  
Whether I wear a plain skirt or a fancy skirt,

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<sup>1</sup>In Lao this idiom means a woman is jaded and looks older than she is.

<sup>2</sup>In Laos, courting young men stroll about the neighborhood in the evenings, playing the *khaen* (something like pan pipes).

It's awful.  
Oh, Tiger, come eat my head, do!"

When her mother heard her daughter complaining like this, she was very concerned. Later on, she told her daughter to try her hand again at weaving and to really concentrate on what she was doing. After instructing her, the mother went and prepared the loom to let her daughter to practice again. But Miss Fair wove just a bit and then went off to sleep. She passed the weaving shuttle about nine times and then slept nine times. That being the case, the wood frame of Miss Fair's loom began to rot.

Suddenly, one day, the mother got a fever and died, abandoning Miss Fair. Her loom was still hanging there but there was no one to advise her. After her mother died, there was no one to weave the cotton skirts for everyday use that Miss Fair wore. All of her skirts grew older and more torn every day. In the end, she no longer had even one skirt to cover her body enough to be able to leave the house.

One day the people of the village got together to go scoop fish with nets at a big pond nearby. Miss Fair heard the group's invitations and wanted to go, both to get fish and to have fun but she didn't have a skirt to wear to go catch fish. After thinking a while, Miss Fair went and collected some sticky sap from a tree to use with the loom.<sup>3</sup> When it was ready, then she cut it and wrapped it around her body as a skirt, and wore it to go look for fish.

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<sup>3</sup> She would quickly glue the threads together into a fabric instead of weaving them.

But when Miss Fair went into the pond water to fish, the sap dissolved and only threads were left hanging. When everyone else went together to climb up the bank and go home, there was only Miss Dark sitting and waiting at the edge for her elder sister. Miss Dark called out to her elder sister, "The sun will fall soon. Let's go home, elder sister."

Miss Fair answered, "Elder sister feels a catfish diving near the bottom of her silk skirt."

Miss Dark didn't wait much longer before calling out again, "Let's go home. The sun has fallen and it is dusk. Younger sister's husband will be waiting."

"Elder sister still feels a fish diving near the bottom of her cotton skirt," replied Miss Fair.

The younger sister was smart and quickly realized that her elder sister was getting so cold that her teeth were chattering and still she refused to climb the bank of the pond because she wasn't wearing a skirt. So the younger sister took the cloth she had wrapped around her head, threw it to her sister in the middle of the pond and told her to wear it and climb out, for fear of her catching cold. "Please climb out, elder sister," she urged.

As for Miss Fair, she knew then that her younger sister understood she had no skirt. She was so ashamed that she wasn't brave enough to turn to look at her sister. Instead she dove deep down into the water and held her breath until she died.

## Miss Chicken Manure, Duck Manure

Once upon a time there was a husband and wife who had lived together for many years. They had two children, both daughters. There came a time when the wife collapsed and died of a disease. She abandoned her two little children to the care of her husband.

The widower did his best to care for his two children until they had grown up into teenage girls of about fifteen or sixteen years old. Without the care of their mother from the time they were small, the various duties had fallen on the father as the person responsible. As the children grew, the father got older and lost his strength. He did some work around the house<sup>1</sup> and lived with his two daughters who would be the supporters of the household until they got husbands and families of their own like everyone else.

The father advised his daughters on managing a household. He taught them about using proper speech, sitting politely, being cautious, extending the ladder to receive guests and make them feel welcome,<sup>2</sup> and not going from house to house maligning others with gossip. Anyone who did all this would be called beautiful by whomever she met.

Many, many days later, the clothes that their mother had made for the girls grew ragged, almost to the point whether they had

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<sup>1</sup>He might have done such tasks as carrying water or husking rice by pounding.

<sup>2</sup>Most Lao people live in a wooden house built several meters above the ground. To enter the house, one must climb stairs or a ladder.

nothing to wear. So their father told them to go clear a garden and plant cotton and mulberry bushes, which would feed the silkworms they would use for spinning silk thread.

When the season came for slash and burn agriculture, the elder and younger sister went together to cultivate the fields. The younger sister worked enthusiastically, knowing neither weariness nor fatigue. Due to her desire to have enough to eat and her fear of starvation, she worked for her old, weak father, who had taken care of her from the time her head was just the size of an olive. Now that she was grown-up, she wanted to do whatever she could to show gratitude toward her father.

When the afternoon sun was low, the younger sister called out to the elder sister,

"Elder sister! Yoo hoo!"

"Here," answered the elder sister.

"Let's go home."

"You go on home. I've got a monkey hanging around that wants to play," yelled the elder sister, not returning. The younger sister started for home, stopping at a stream to bathe, and scrubbing the dust from her body several times so she would be clean. When she had freshened up she returned home.

When the sun's rays were weak and evening was quickly falling, the elder sister, crazy about playing with the monkey, was still way up in the trees. Whenever she got down to return home, the lonely monkey tried to keep her, baring his teeth in a skull's grimace and crying, "Keek, keek." It was a fearsome sight.

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When the monkey finally let her get down, the sun had fallen over the horizon, and it was impossible to do any kind of work in the dark. The elder sister thought fearfully of her father's anger; her younger sister had most certainly reached home already and told on her.

So the elder sister decided to roll her body in dust and soot. She became as black as charcoal and you could see only her white teeth flashing brightly. She returned home, looking upset. She climbed up into the house and complained crankily that her little sister had abandoned her and had not done any work at all. "Just look at her, so clean and pretty. And me all black and sooty!"

The father listened to the elder sister talking and she sounded right, so he got angry with the younger daughter who just sat quietly listening. He spoke harshly to her but she did not argue even a word.

When the season for slashing, burning and plowing came, the sisters went to care for the mulberry bushes and look for silk cocoons. Soon it was time to weave the silk thread. All the other girls in the village had someone to instruct them on how to gather and tie the silk into *mutmee*<sup>3</sup> patterns, but the sisters had no one to teach them.

The father built a loom for each of them. The elder sister wanted to place her loom right in front of the chicken and duck coop. The chickens walked around and "taught" her. The chickens

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<sup>3</sup> The intricate patterns of *mutmee* silk are made by tying the silk thread in different sections and dyeing it in different colors before weaving.

slept and "helped" her. The younger sister liked to weave at the edge of the road. Vietnamese would come by and instruct her. Hill tribespeople would go by and advise her.

The threads of the elder sister's loom began to tear and fall apart. The chickens came and went and scratched around. The pretty cotton and silk threads were soon covered with duck and chicken manure. The younger sister, weaving at the edge of the road, made skirts with pleasing patterns on account of the hill tribespeople and Vietnamese who, coming and going, advised her.

When she saw her younger sister's pretty clothes, the elder sister secretly took them all. When it came time for religious ceremonies, the younger sister had no pretty clothes to wear. The elder sister told the father, "Sister Imom worked at the loom at the edge of the road, but she didn't get anything done. Hill people passed by and unravelled her weaving. Vietnamese passed by and destroyed it."

The father became angry with the younger sister and told her, "Whatever you do, you are to follow the example of your elder sister. Do whatever she does."

Several years later, both daughters got married and had children. One day the father was thinking of his children and grandchildren, and wanted to visit the houses of his daughters and sons-in-laws to ask how their lives were and what kind of happiness or suffering they had.

The father dropped in on the elder sister first. When he climbed to the top of the stairs, he did not know what the mess all



over was. He couldn't find a place to sit. He turned to look at his grandchildren but saw only grubby, filthy little people. The sleeping room was the same as a rabbit warren. If you went into it at night, you would trip on something and fall down.

At first the father had thought he would stay two or three nights, but when he saw how it was at the home of his elder daughter's, he hurried on to visit his younger daughter.

When he came to his younger daughter's home, the father felt very comfortable and much better. He saw that the front of the house was clean. There were fruit trees heavy with fresh, fragrant fruit. Beneath the house, there was a big mother pig stretched out on her stomach, letting her piglets drink milk. There were chickens cackling noisily.

His younger daughter came down to welcome her father and then looked for food and drink to serve him, and prepared tobacco for him to smoke. He could see fish and meat drying on the porch. His grandchildren were lovely to look at, and they wore clothes made of new cloth. When he saw all of this, the father began to cry because he had always gotten angry and scolded Imom for being bone lazy. Because of his elder daughter's fibbing and defaming, the father had misunderstood.

Before he left, the younger daughter and son-in-law gave him so many gifts he could not carry them all. From then on, the father knew which of his daughters was good and which was bad.

## The Rich Man's Daughter

In a former time there was a rich man. He was a person of high status and had much influence. He had so much gold and property it was hard to find another to compare to him. As well as this, in the family of the rich man there was a daughter as fair and beautiful as a peeled egg.<sup>1</sup> There was not another girl whose beauty could compare with hers in that whole region.

Her beauty was wellknown and recognized in every village. As well as being beautiful, she was a young girl with a heart that followed the Dharma, and she had gentle, sweet manners. She never boasted, put on airs, or thought too highly of herself.

All this being so, the young single men, many brave and bold men, fell in love with her and fantasized secretly about her. But whatever their fantasies, these remained only dreams. Each day young men bravely stepped out to greet and establish friendship with her. But an obstacle blocked them, not allowing any of the young men to boldly step into the yard of her house. They were hesitant because of their fear of the girl's father, who was possessive and protected his daughter well.

No matter who the brave young man was, no matter who showed his face for adventure to go confront the snobbery and disdain of the father, if the young man sought to be bold, he would have his hopes dashed when he was chased from the house-not unlike a mangy dog who had snuck into the house to cower in the kitchen.

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<sup>1</sup>Refers to the girl's pale color and her smooth, perfect appearance.

Time passed until the rich man was getting older and more wrinkled with each day. His hopes for a son-in-law with high status and piles of wealth of his own drifted away and the rich man was almost devoid of hope. Reflecting on this, he asked himself "Should I wait to seek a good husband for my daughter to marry, according to my wishes?" He thought and thought, but he couldn't think of anything new.

One day the rich man had a good idea. He announced to all the brave, young men from every corner of the town that at the beginning of the cold season of this year, the rich man would offer his daughter for marriage. He would not choose based on appearance, age, status, or rank. The rich man would only request that the men agree to the conditions which he set. The potential suitor would take off his clothes and sleep nude face down in the dirty water of the sewer ditch under the house of the rich man for one whole night of the cold season. If a young man could endure sleeping soaked in the cold, dirty water all night, the rich man would agree to immediately give his daughter in marriage to that man.

This news spread quickly and created much excitement and happiness among all bachelors, young and old. Every man thought he would have the chance to test his courage and ability for the rich man to see. If he was lucky, he might become the conqueror of the girl whose beauty was like that of the clouds.

When night came, young men, regardless of appearance, status or age, volunteered to sleep in the sewer ditch filled with rotten

water. They never missed a night. Some nights a boy with a handsome appearance and a well-formed body came to volunteer, but he would sleep only until midnight as he could not endure the cold. The midnight cold chilled right to the bone and caused legs and shins to go numb. Afraid that his legs would be paralyzed, he, like all the others, would have to arise and go inform the rich man that he had given up.

By now the news of the rich man's offer had reached the ears of an orphan boy who lived in a faraway community. That young man worked as a hired laborer in the rice fields, earning just enough to take care of himself each day. When he heard about the rich man's daughter, he was interested and wanted to volunteer to try his luck.

The following night, he presented himself, with only the clothes on his back, at the house of the rich man. The orphan stated his intentions and his willingness to follow all the conditions that the rich man had set. As soon as it was time, he took off his clothes and lay down his naked body to sleep in the putrid water of the sewer ditch. At midnight the late night chill hit his body. It was as if his entire body was as stiff as a piece of iron submerged in water.

All that remained was his breathing and the strength of his will power, which is an attribute of farmers' children who bathe in sweat for a life, struggling with both sunshine and rain. Heat is not feared, cold is not dreaded. The orphan boy clenched his teeth and endured the cold. The fog of the late night fell, covering the

olive trees and the blades of grass. The area was soon shrouded with what looked like white bolls of cotton.

At the top of the house, the rich man waited and secretly watched for the movement of the orphan boy. "Bah," he said. "This orphan boy, will he endure sleeping soaked in the cold? Where will it end? Has he already died and is stiff?", the rich man asked himself out of surprise as the sun began to rise. The rich man saw that the boy still had not risen from the ditch of rotten sewer water, so he went down to secretly peek and get a closer look. Then he asked, "Orphan boy! Yoo hoo! You've slept soaked in this sewer water since dusk. Now it's time for you to explain. Don't you feel cold?"

The orphan boy answered in a voice accented by the sound of his chin trembling with cold, "Mr. Rich . . . Man . . . . I'm . . . most . . . cold!"

The rich man asked further, "But why don't you accept to rise from the water?"

The orphan boy answered from a body shaking with cold, "I made a promise that I would follow all the conditions set. While the sky is not light and the sun does not shine, I absolutely will not get up out of this sewer ditch."

When the rich man heard the orphan boy talk in this way, he was shocked and so afraid that his heart almost lost the strength to keep beating<sup>2</sup>. "To be sure, if this orphan boy must endure

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<sup>2</sup>The rich man realizes that his daughter may marry the farm boy with no wealth or family.

sleeping soaked in the cold, putrid water of the sewer ditch until the sun shines, he will truly do it," he thought to himself.

So the rich man sought to trick the orphan boy. He brought firewood and kindling and built a fire near the place in the sewer ditch where the orphan boy slept soaked. When the sun shone over the horizon and rose up into the sky, the rich man went down to the orphan boy and said, "The sun is shining already. Get up and come rinse yourself and wash your face, orphan boy."

The orphan boy got up from the sewer ditch and washed his face, rinsed his eyes, and put on his clothes in an orderly fashion. After that, the rich man said "Orphan boy, it's good that you endured sleeping soaked in this rotten sewer water from dusk until the dawn's brightening, but you should think about being grateful to me because I have gone without rest and sleep with you. I got up and built a fire to warm you. If I had not built a fire, you probably would have died from cold long ago, or who knows what?"<sup>3</sup>

When the orphan boy heard these words of the rich man, he bowed his head and felt his heart stinging with pain. He thought to himself, "Oh, what does it take to make one feel warm? The fire was on land, but I slept soaked in the sewer ditch below. The rich man closed his eyes to this, and spoke without considering what he was saying-in a way that does not truly follow the Dharma!"

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<sup>3</sup>The rich man is trying to take credit for helping the orphan endure the night in the ditch. He implies that without the fire the orphan would have froze or given up, thus winning the daughter unfairly.

As for the daughter of the rich man, she had been following the events since morning had come, and when she observed her father acting in this way, she began to feel pity and sadness for the orphan boy. She was not happy with her father who had spoken unreasonably.

At this time, the rich man called to his daughter, "Youngest, cherished daughter of mine. I want you to prepare food and drink to give the orphan boy so he can roll rice with us for breakfast<sup>4</sup> before I make him go home. I will eat breakfast with him in order to make him feel better."

The rich man's daughter hurried quickly to prepare food and drink as her father had commanded. All kinds of fried foods, curries, sauces and other dishes filled the serving tray.

After the daughter had prepared everything neatly, she carried the tray of food out for her father and the young orphan boy and then returned to sit in the kitchen, waiting to clear away the food plates. The rich man began by dipping his hand and leading the orphan boy to eat.

The first thing the rich man did was to take the spoon to scoop some curry into his mouth. But the curry was as bland as river water, so he took some rice and dipped it into a bowl of sauce. It was hot but flavorless. The other dishes were the same.

The rich man was surprised at this and called to his daughter who was still in the kitchen, "My little daughter, you didn't

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<sup>4</sup>Most Lao eat sticky rice which they roll into a ball for dipping in various sauces.

forget to add salt, did you?"

The rich man's daughter politely answered her father, "Yes, I added salt already." The rich man then queried further, "If you added it, where is it? Why isn't the food tasty?"

His daughter answered, "I put it underneath the bottom of the bowl."

The rich man lifted each bowl and looked for the salt. Surprised, he asked his daughter, "Why did you put the salt at the bottom of the bowl this way? Is the food more delicious this way?"

His daughter waited an appropriate amount of time before walking from the kitchen to answer her father in a hurt voice, "When you built the fire on land, how could you expect it to warm the orphan boy sleeping below in the cold rotten water of the sewer ditch?"

When the rich man heard these words spoken by his daughter, it made his face go pale and drained of color, "Does this mean you love the orphan boy?"

His daughter answered immediately, "That's right. I don't just love him, but I also respect his generosity, integrity and purity-his way of following the Dharma.

"No matter how poor he is, I will be content to marry him: whether he is wealthy or poor, his status high or low. There is only one way to measure the value of being human-that is how he follows the Dharma. That is the single and only thing, Papa, by which to measure the value of a human."



When the orphan boy heard the rich man's daughter talking like this, his heart smiled because he knew he had succeeded.

## The Story of Nang Pawadi-

### A Model Lao Woman

#### Introduction

I have written the story of Nang<sup>1</sup> Pawadi because I know the habits and heart of a good woman like her. How did I get to know the habits and history of such a woman?

I was a very close friend of Thaw<sup>2</sup> Somjay, the husband of Nang Pawadi. From the time we were little children, we two friends lived in houses so close together that it could be said that we were sharing a house. We went to same school and were upper classmates at the same institute. We joined government service at the same time. We were married on the same day.

Whenever I met Thaw Somjay, I had an opportunity to converse with Nang Pawadi. Nang Pawadi had various noteworthy traits which have continued from that time. Thus she told me her life's history: from the time she was a small child, through her teenage years, to becoming the lifelong mate who shared hardship and happiness with Thaw Somjay.

I have taken the story of Nang Pawadi to tell to you, esteemed readers, because, frankly, I want ordinary Lao women to have polite, discrete and proper manners, and gentle, sweet speech. I

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<sup>1</sup>Nang is the Lao prefix used for addressing single and married women. It corresponds to the English words "Miss" or "Mrs."

<sup>2</sup>Thaw is used to address men. It corresponds to "Mr."

want them to know low from high,<sup>3</sup> to be good housewives, to eat well, and to have correct behavior. The most important thing is that they always have the precepts of the Dharma<sup>4</sup> in their hearts at every moment. Attributes such as these are qualities of a woman which urge others to like and admire her, no matter how homely she is. The point is to ask all Lao women who want to be good people to try to take the example of the heroine in the following story which you will read.

In order to guard against misunderstandings I request the reader to note and try to understand one of the story's sentences which goes like this:

It is appropriate then to hold her up as a superior Lao woman and as a female example for ordinary Lao people.

I do not mean here that Nang Pawadi is a better woman than all other Lao women in our nation. I intended to say that Nang Pawadi is not of royal bloodlines and she is not the offspring of a millionaire. Because of that, I did not compare her to those of noble lineage or ancestry; I compared her to ordinary common people. But that does not mean that Nang Pawadi is more excellent than anyone else.

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<sup>3</sup>Refers to an awareness of social rank, and the ability to behave and use appropriate speech according to one's social standing. In the Lao language, pronouns indicates where the speaker situates herself in relation to the listener.

<sup>4</sup>These refer to the most basic rules that Buddhists should uphold. The Dharma, which constitutes the teachings of the Buddha, states five minimum moral obligations: to refrain from destroying life, from stealing, from engaging in improper sex, from telling lies, and from using intoxicants. See: Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

I ask the reader to understand my real meaning as follows:

It is appropriate then to hold her as a superior Lao woman and as one example of a Lao woman. But in the multitude of common women, there are others who can be appropriately held up as superior Lao women and can be model Lao women the same or more so.

Samjin Ngir  
Vientiane, October 14, 196

### Nominating Nang Pawadi

The birth date, the home address and town of the woman called Nang Pawadi I request to keep a secret. I ask plainly that the reader knows just that Nang Pawadi is Lao and that her parents are not of royal blood nor millionaires. They are just citizens of a land that is neither rich nor poor. Thus we can say that they are of the level of *kadumph*i.

The appearance of Nang Pawadi: she is a person just a little short, her skin is the color of the the *sadeua* flower. She is a little on the chubby side. Her manners are graceful; she has been smart since she was little. She knows low from high. She shows respect to people of all levels who have the opportunity to associate with her, both those greater and lesser.

Regarding the physical appearance of this woman, it would be said that she is not a beautiful woman nor a homely woman. She is a person who has an appearance good enough to look at or see in the mirror. The most important thing is that she is a person who keeps the precepts of the Dharma constant in her heart.

## Women Compared with Flowers

The physical beauty of human beings is not so important if they do not keep the teachings of the Dharma constant in their hearts. The person who has a beautiful appearance but lacks the precepts of the Dharma cannot win against those who follow the Dharma but have a homely appearance. If one does not abstain from anger, there will be no one who is happy to socialize with them, no matter how beautiful they are.

Humans born into this world have a thousand forms, but choose according to their own wishes they cannot do. The end depends on nature<sup>5</sup> to arrange: some are beautiful, some are plain. Those people who are beautiful are popular with those who meet and see them. They are like flowers of beautiful colors. Those people who are homely trick the hearts of those who see them, like flowers which are not beautiful. If flowers have both beautiful colors and fragrant scent, they satisfy everyone. If they have just pretty colors and form but lack scent, they are not hardly worth the flowers which have fragrant scents but are not pretty. People with beautiful appearances and good hearts are admired by everyone.

Why was Nang Pawadi admired by anyone who met her? You will know the reasons after reading this short history of her life.

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<sup>5</sup>The author's view of nature as the determiner of physical appearance may be contrasted to some Buddhists' beliefs that physical beauty or defects are a result of karma (volitional action) in past lives.

## A Short Biography of Nang Pawadi

Nang Pawadi had two elder brothers. One was named Thaw San, the other was named Thaw Suwan. Her older sister was called Nang Khen. Her two younger brothers were Thaw Phommadi and Thaw Nak. The family were devout Buddhists and went to the temple to listen to the preaching of the Dharma and made merit when their income allowed.

When Nang Pawadi was a young girl of twelve, her father died. Her widowed mother, whose name was Grandma Pathu,<sup>6</sup> fell on hard times and had to raise crops and plow fields in order to feed all of her children. On the days when they had to work in the fields, Nang Pawadi got up while it was still dark in order to go with her mother. First she steamed rice, then she prepared the tools and carried them on a pole across her shoulders like her mother. On the days when her little brothers went along too, she would lead them by the hand and when they got tired, she carried all their tools on her back. There were no complaints about the situation because she did what her mother wished and listened attentively. She helped her mother and gave her nothing to worry about.

Her mother's house was a wooden house on posts.<sup>7</sup> The floor was bamboo wattle. The thatch roof was very clean. The area beneath

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<sup>6</sup>The Lao often use family terms to address people who may not be biological kin. For example, Nang Pawadi's mother is known by other villagers as Grandma Pathu, a sign of affection and respect.

<sup>7</sup>Most Lao villagers build their houses off the ground for better ventilation and to escape crawling insects and the floods during the rainy season.

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the house was also clean because Nang Pawadi and her older brothers and sisters swept it. The yard was nice and smooth and without any litter because they all trimmed and swept it everyday.

In regards to this house, Nang Pawadi herself was the one who really kept things tidy, putting everything in its proper place and always in that same place. After she took something out to use, she always returned it to its former place in order to keep everything in a lasting order. When things are done this way, if we want something we can find it easily. We do not need to look all over for it and waste time.

Besides the work already mentioned, whenever the women did not go to the fields, they went to make offerings to the monks<sup>8</sup>. Thus they never missed a chance to respond to the drums that mark the monks' noon meal, and joined in making merit and giving alms.

From the time Nang Pawadi was little, she was the one who managed the housework to help her mother. Because of this, she could not go to study and was illiterate. This was most sad. If Nang Pawadi had gone to school, she would have the same knowledge as girls nowadays and would probably have excellent qualifications.

One day Nang Pawadi did not go to the rice fields with her mother because Thaw Phommadi, her younger brother, had a fever. The little brother complained that his head hurt and called to his

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<sup>8</sup>In the Buddhist religion, women cannot become monks, so they attempt to build up merit for future lives by making offerings of food, saffron-colored cloth (for robes), and household necessities to the monks at the local temple. Just after dawn, many women take food that they have prepared and present it to the monks, who walk in a group through the village or town, accepting whatever food or flowers they are given.

sister, "Elder sister, bring a pot of water and spray it on me, please."<sup>9</sup> So Nang Pawadi brought a pot of water and called the villagers to come to help heal him. But Thaw Phommadi's condition grew worse until he stopped breathing and died. Nang Pawadi got the white funeral cloth and spread it over the corpse.<sup>10</sup> She then invited the villagers to come in order to be his companions until her mother returned from the fields. In that era there were no expert doctors like nowadays. There were only folk doctors. That is why it was beyond Nang Pawadi's ability to save her little brother's life.

Another day, when the villagers informed them that they should take firewood to offer at the temple, Nang Pawadi and Thaw Suwan, her elder brother, went. When they stopped at a place in the forest to cut firewood, it was not long before the wind came up, the rain started to fall, and lightning split the clouds. All of a sudden, Thaw Suwan and Nang Pawadi fell down, struck by lightning. The little sister fell on top of her brother, squashing him. He died but she still breathed. A group of their friends arranged to carry the corpse on a pole carried between two men, while the injured person was returned to her mother's house. They then arranged the cremation and watched over Nang Pawadi, nursing her back to life. This was the first time Nang Pawadi escaped death.

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<sup>9</sup>Lao folk medicine sometimes requires the care giver to fill his or her mouth with water and spray it on the patient.

<sup>10</sup>The corpse is usually wrapped in a white cloth while awaiting cremation and Buddhist rites.



## Mother Pathu Takes a New Husband

Five years later, Mother Pathu was having trouble providing for her several children, so she took a new husband who was a widower and who already had a daughter with the name of Nang Awn<sup>11</sup>. Nang Awn was older than Nang Pawadi. Later Mother Pathu gave birth to a son by her new husband. The son's name was Thaw Jum.

The wife's children and the husband's children envied each other, as is usual. Nang Awn was a lazy person who liked things easy-just the opposite of Nang Pawadi. The new father saw that Nang Pawadi was a diligent and steady person, and soon he loved her more than his own daughter. So Nang Awn envied Nang Pawadi even more.

In the same time it took Nang Pawadi to weave ten pieces of skirt cloth<sup>12</sup>, Nang Awn wove only one. Because of this, the elder sister was full of resentment and looked for stories to tell to make her father hate the younger sister. But even so, Nang Pawadi was good-hearted. She treated her elder stepsister in a gentle, sweet manner and loved her little brother Thaw Jum. The youngest ones were like children of the same father and mother. Nang Pawadi was not envious or jealous of anyone. She respected her stepfather as she had her real father and loved the children of her new father as her own flesh-and-blood sister and brothers.

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<sup>11</sup>A literal translation is "Miss Tender."

<sup>12</sup>Most Lao girls learn how to weave cotton or silk cloth for sarong-type skirts on the family's wooden loom, which is usually located under the house, in the shade.

## Nang Pawadi Has a Spouse

When Nang Pawadi was yet little, she went to massage and walk on the back of an old woman, without requiring any kind of payment. The old woman blessed her: "May you have a good husband." Nang Pawadi pressed her hands together<sup>13</sup> and said "Please let it be as Grandmother has said."

At nineteen Nang Pawadi married a good man who was a scientific academic, according to the wishes of the old woman who had blessed her when she was still little. Her spouse's name was Thaw Somjay. She tried to care for the man who was her husband, believing that the husband was a person who must be held in great respect. She knew how to take care of the house. She knew quite a bit more about order and discipline than other women who had received higher education. She could not read but amazingly she could figure numbers without paper or pencil for amounts of money in the ten thousands, hundred thousands, and millions. No matter what the price of the goods which she bought, she could always remember their costs.

## Nang Pawadi is a Good Housewife

Nang Pawadi was an excellent housewife. She always went to sleep after her husband. Even when Thaw Somjay worked late, she would forego sleep and wait until he had completed his work-except on those occasions when he gave her permission to go to bed before

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<sup>13</sup>Raising one's palms together in front of the chest or head is a way of showing respect.

him. When she slept she would put her own pillow lower than her husband's pillow and always sleep at his left side.<sup>14</sup> When morning came, Nang Pawadi would try to awaken before her husband in order to clean the house, arrange for bathing<sup>15</sup>, and make hot coffee and tea in a tidy manner.

Nang Pawadi kept her clothes put away in their proper places and took them out to wear for different times: clothes for the market, clothes for going out for fun, clothes especially for going to make merit. She took them out one set at a time so that when she wanted to use them, she could find the clothes easily without wasting time looking for them.

Her attire was ordinary, clean, and neat. She did not seek out strange, unusual fashions that other people did not have. Her skirts were neither too long nor too short-just enough to be pretty. Sometimes she used lipstick, but she did not powder her face until it was fake white nor use lipstick so thick that it could peel off, because she believed that these were just tricks to deceive the eyes unnaturally. She sought things that were beautiful but not more contrary to nature than they ought to be.

When Thaw Somjay returned from the office, he could see that the meal was ready, the household things were in their proper places, and nothing was messy. Everything was where it always was.

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<sup>14</sup>The Lao concern for social hierarchy is manifested in physical arrangements. A wife's head should never be at a higher level than her husband's. To sleep to the right of the husband is understood by many Lao to indicate that the wife is "stronger" and is therefore a mark of disrespect.

<sup>15</sup>Probably refers to carrying water for the splash bath.

In the living room, there were flowers in a vase. The bedroom was swept and tidy, and every place was clean and pleasing to the eye.

Nang Pawadi herself went to the market, cooked and ironed the clothes. She only sought out hired help to scrub the floors, which took about an hour to clean. When the time was up, she gave wages of about 400 to 500 kip<sup>16</sup> to the maid each time and then told her to run along because she did not want to be disturbed. When Nang Pawadi asked the neighborhood children to go buy goods which the house was lacking, upon their return she gave them 20 or 30 kip. When it was time to receive guests for a party, the little children would assemble in the shade and ask for money and Nang Pawadi would distribute about 10 or 20 kip to each of them. Because of that, the children adored her and called her "Mrs. Grandmother".

One day Thaw Somjay asked his wife, "Why don't you take on a servant or two? Our monthly salary is sufficient to cover the cost." Nang Pawadi answered, "If we take on a servant, what would I do to keep myself occupied? We are born with hands and feet to do work, not just to sleep and eat. What others do will not satisfy us like that which we do ourselves. Every foot, every hand suffers."<sup>17</sup>

Since they had been together, Nang Pawadi had never once used informal pronouns with her husband. She used only "little slave"

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<sup>16</sup>According to one Lao source, in 1967 the Lao currency known as kip was valued at one U.S. dollar to 240 kip.

<sup>17</sup>Meaning physical suffering is more tolerable than emotional suffering.

to refer to herself.<sup>18</sup> She always had but a cheerful face towards her husband. She was never contrary or vexed her husband in a way that might cause quarrels to arise between them. Even though she was only one year younger than her husband, she called her husband "Papa"<sup>19</sup> and, in front of the children, "Mr. Grandfather," in order to humble herself like the nieces and nephews<sup>20</sup> who must be supervised by their parents, uncles, and grandfathers.

When her husband finished dressing and was ready to descend from the house and go to work, Nang Pawadi took a look at his clothes. If she felt that they were smelly already, then he had to change them so that she could take them for washing.

### The Welcome

When her husband was not at home, Nang Pawadi received guests who came to visit Thaw Somjay. She smiled radiantly and spoke pleasantly, thus making people really like her personality and heart. When her husband's nieces and nephews or former students came to visit, Nang Pawadi used the pronoun "little slave." When

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<sup>18</sup> Khaawy ("I") and jaw ("you") are used in conversations between people who are of relatively equal status. By using kha naawy ("little slave"), Nang Pawadi elevates her husband.

<sup>19</sup>According to some Lao, "Papa" would only be used by those with a French background. Some suggest that the story of Nang Pawadi and Thaw Somjay is in fact autobiographical-Somjin Nginn, who was also known as Pierre Nginn, was the son of a Lao woman and a Frenchman.

<sup>20</sup>Luuk, laan literally means "children and grandchildren," but here refers to the nieces and nephews of the childless couple.

Thaw Somjay heard this, he asked his wife, "Why do you say 'little slave' with my nieces, nephews, and former students?" Nang Pawadi answered, "They have education, thus they are superior, so I say 'little slave'. What kind of advantage can they take? There is nothing to lose. A tongue can be twisted in any way."

### Nang Pawadi Received Little Education

Thaw Somjay wanted his own beloved wife to be able to read and write Lao and French so he sent her to primary school in Luang Prabang. She was getting older so she had problems studying and could not remember things easily like children can. Even so she could read simple words: snake, fish, and others.<sup>21</sup> She hadn't been in school five months before she left because she was concerned about her housework at home.

### Socializing with the Parents and Relatives of Her Husband

Nang Pawadi displayed the utmost respect for her husband's parents and all of her husband's relatives. Social ties with them were the same as with her own parents and relatives. She had generosity and support to spread among their group when they wanted help. She showed her concern by visiting and bringing gifts. She did not say or do things which might upset them.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ngu* and *pa* ("snake," "fish") are simple words, among the first that Lao children learn to read, much like American children learn to read "dog" or "cat."

## Socializing with Ordinary People

Nang Pawadi did not socialize only with her husband's relatives. She also socialized with people from every social level and age group, especially those poor who work from dawn to dark to make a living. She had compassion and kindness and gave alms with a full heart. When people came to her saying, "Giving alms (to the poor) doesn't earn merit. Giving alms to people who have temples earns merit,"<sup>22</sup> she felt sad and answered, "Giving alms to people who are amputees or blind, to those who have no home or food to eat, earns plenty of merit and is better than giving to people who have temples. Because they (the poor) are starving, we are helping them to stay alive. The giving of alms in the way of Buddhism is a doing of good that cannot be denied. The compassion of the spirit must be spread to everybody, without selecting favorites."

Nang Pawadi had a flat that she rented but she took only a cheap rent-half or less of the charge which other landlords asked from renters. Other landlords raised their rents every year but Nang Pawadi did not raise hers even once. If the people coming to ask to rent were refugees or fleeing the war, Nang Pawadi did not take a penny.

If people came from her birthplace, she would visit them. She was happy to welcome them as warmly as a relative, whomever came. She gave 2,000 to 3,000 kip to each and paid for their return trip home too.

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<sup>22</sup>Refers to Buddhist monks.

## Nang Pawadi is Sick with Mental Illness

We already know that Nang Pawadi had a compassionate spirit towards people of all social levels and ages. Thaw Somjay and Nang Pawadi as husband and wife had no children together but they had nieces and nephews. Some nieces and nephews came to bother them, asking for money or jewelry. Nang Pawadi would give according to the wants of the one asking but if she was disturbed very often, she would get angry. But this anger did not come from Nang Pawadi's usual personality. This kind of fury was caused by mental illness. It was a symptom of a disease and made her forget everything temporarily. Sometimes she spoke up and upset her husband. This was due to her mental illness which made her really crazy and insane. But Thaw Somjay did not mind or find fault in her because he understood that it was an illness.

Nang Pawadi became mentally ill because of her sadness. When her husband brought her to Vientiane,<sup>23</sup> she got the news that her father-in-law was looking for a new wife for his son, Thaw Somjay. She could not speak out.<sup>24</sup> But she felt depressed in her heart because she was afraid that her husband would leave her and go off to marry someone else.

When the couple went to visit Thaw Somjay's mother in Luang

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<sup>23</sup>The capital of Laos.

<sup>24</sup>This suggests that Thaw Somjay's father did not recognize Nang Pawadi as his son's legal wife, but perhaps only as his mistress or secondary wife.



Prabang<sup>25</sup>, Nang Pawadi heard that her mother-in-law had also been looking for another wife for Thaw Somjay. Her depression increased until she developed the symptoms of a nervous breakdown. It took several months to cure and she got better. Even so, her health was not as good as before, yet she still continued to make merit and offerings. Her compassion and kindness were always with her.

Her aunts<sup>26</sup> who came to visit liked to grumble and complain to her. Nang Pawadi was worried more about other people than about herself, and thus her sadness and sickness grew worse. Because of this, her husband prevented others from coming to disturb her so that she could live peacefully and mend her heart and spirit. These actions did not at all mean that Thaw Somjay was mean-hearted and hated others, but showed his true love towards his wife, the sick person.

Nang Pawadi grew upset to the point that she was ill after she got the news of the death of her stepfather and her real mother. Also at this time people came to her to complain of poverty and suffering.

People came and talked in loud voices. People came to visit at meal times or nap times in the afternoon. There were people who knocked loudly on the door of the house and, on repeated mornings, people who banged on the door without waiting around even a minute. Nang Pawadi used to say that people who did this wanted her to fly

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<sup>25</sup>The royal capital until the Lao monarchy was abolished in 1975.

<sup>26</sup>Probably means older female friends.

like a bird to open the door, and that people who banged on the door never thought that she might be busy with chores, or in the middle of taking a bath, putting on clothes, or going to the bathroom.

Another thing that upset Nang Pawadi until she became sick was when she saw a group of students bringing bicycles or motorcycles up to block the door of the house. People who did this did not know that doors were used for going in and out. Nang Pawadi felt bothered when people who had studied, instead of being smart and knowing better, did stupid things just like someone who had never developed. When she saw examples of this, she said, "Studies and learning must be used usefully. Study is not just a useful way to gain rank. It is also for small things like politeness. Every polite Lao man or woman should know what is proper."

There was one more thing that made Nang Pawadi angry to the core. That was when old women would say, "This people is evil; that people is no good. This nationality are robbers; they like to tell lies." Or they would complain, "My son went to study in France and married a French woman. Oh, hell, oh . . . "

When Nang Pawadi heard this kind of speech, painful to the ears, she could not endure it and answered, "Are not the French and other nationalities people the same as you? Whatever the nationality, Lao or others, it has good people and bad people. You are calling a entire nationality bad-you can't do that. In that case, if you say the Lao people are bad, you are a bad person as well because you are Lao."

## The Mental Illness Gets Worse

Nang Pawadi's mental illness ceased temporarily and then returned in a serious way. Due to the blood going to her brain, she fell into a coma in critical condition until she was unconscious for several days. When she returned to consciousness enough to be able to speak, she asked after her beloved husband. When her husband moved closer, she pulled his hand and kissed it, and expressed concern for everything and everyone, asking about relatives and neighbors.

She was afraid no one was taking care of her husband. When she was able to eat, her niece watched over her at the hospital and brought rice soup to feed her. Each time before she ate, Nang Pawadi would gently ask her niece, "Has you uncle eaten already? Do we still have plenty of rice soup? Go give some to each of the hospital nurses, okay? Please share some delicious food with the doctor and his wife too." Even when Nang Pawadi was in great pain, she was always still worried about others.

While she was still sick in bed, if she wanted to eat fruit or canned food she would ask someone to go buy it and bring it to her, telling them the proper price as well. "Please buy grapes. They are 500 kip a kilo. Big Bangkok oranges are 140 kip a piece. Litchi fruit is 140 kip a can." These are some examples. She remembered the price of everything she had ever bought at the market.

## Nang Pawadi-A Model Woman

Thaw Somjay and Nang Pawadi were a husband and wife who shared both suffering and happiness for several decades until they were old and could be counted as an eternal couple<sup>27</sup>. They never argued except when Nang Pawadi was oppressed with illness and had thoughts that were abnormal and unusual. But those lasted only a moment and when she regained consciousness, she asked for her husband to request his forgiveness<sup>28</sup>.

She got angry sometimes because the mental illness was still with her and was impossible to control. This being the case, respected readers, you will probably agree that we must forgive Nang Pawadi.

If she had studied and had appropriate knowledge and good health, and did not suffer a disease controlling her as she did, Nang Pawadi might have been called a superior Lao woman today.

## Addendum

In assembling the story of Nang Pawadi, I have forgotten some parts that I should have told the reader. Because of that I am adding them below.

Because Nang Pawadi believed unwaveringly in Buddhism in a strong way since she was young, she became a Buddhist nun while she

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<sup>27</sup>Some Lao Buddhists believe a husband and wife may be brought together repeatedly in different reincarnations.

<sup>28</sup>In the original text, Nang Pawadi asks for forgiveness by crouching to offer flowers and pressing her palms together in respect.

was still a girl. But after just a week she left the nun's order. It was this way because when she went home to visit, her younger brother was after her to stroke her head with his hand. Her little brother was just an innocent child who knew nothing, and he had never seen a shaved head. Thus he wanted to take his hand and stroke her head.<sup>29</sup> Nang Pawadi felt sad that she could not be ordained for longer than this.

Although Nang Pawadi practiced Buddhism, she never once looked down on other religions. Once she had the opportunity to go to a church to join in celebrating a wedding ceremony of a bridal couple she knew who were Christians. She also used to donate offerings to the Christian priest when he was collecting. She also gave offerings to people of other religions such as Islam. Nang Pawadi was very sad when she heard people claim that this religion was good or that religion was bad and state reasons that were unpleasant to listen to.

Because of her mental illness, Nang Pawadi wandered away from home several times, but if she went to sleep at a relative's house, someone would lead her home. Once when she was crazy she ran away to the province of Udorn in Thailand. Her husband did not get the news that she had wandered there, so he went and filed a missing person's report at the police station and requested the police look for her. Four or five days later, people from Udorn came and

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<sup>29</sup> The top of the head is the most sacred part of the body. It is especially sacred in the case of monks or nuns. Thus Nang Pawadi may have felt uncomfortable with her brother's actions and decided to resign from the order.

reported to him that Nang Pawadi had come to their own home with nothing but the clothes she was wearing. They then told him, "Now Grandmother [Nang Pawadi] is in an abnormal condition, so we are asking permission to nurse her. Let her stay two or three weeks with us and then we will bring her home to you." It was just merit<sup>30</sup> that Nang Pawadi was still conscious enough to reach the house of her relatives. If she had not, she might have jumped into the water and drowned.

Another time, on the occasion of a religious festival at That Luang<sup>31</sup>, Thaw Somjay went to join the festivities and stayed on after it got dark. Nang Pawadi was concerned, so she went looking for her husband at That Luang but did not see him anywhere. There were hundreds of thousands of people joining in the party there, so how could she look for her husband at all? Crazy from worry, Nang Pawadi jumped from a house and broke one of her legs. Then she went to the hospital and stayed there a month until she could walk again.

Civil servants often used to like to visit Thaw Somjay to get him to help translate books and articles for the newspapers. Whatever the day, several people would come to see Thaw Somjay, to the point that he complained, "People are always coming to disturb me. I cannot get any of my own work done." When Nang Pawadi heard her husband grumble like that she said, "Stop, stop. Don't complain

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<sup>30</sup>Lao Buddhists believe that fortunate events are the result of merits earned for good deeds in former lives.

<sup>31</sup>One of the most important monuments in Laos. Located near Vientiane, it is the site of national rites.

any more. Words can move around. People might hear, Papa oooh!" She was afraid of other people getting jealous or hating her so she said, "If people hate us, it will be hard to live. You can live in a narrow space, but it's hard to live with a narrow heart."

It was Nang Pawadi's habit that when she went to the market or on personal errands, she did not want to ride in a car because she believed it was too pretentious. She only liked to ride in a pedicab. When she got into the pedicab, she would tell her destination and always give the fare to the driver in advance. Whenever they saw her, the pedicab drivers who knew Nang Pawadi's good habits would run over to her in a bunch and ask, "Madam Mother, where are you going? I'll take you there."

Because of Nang Pawadi's good heart and habits, people from both near and far, when they heard the news that Nang Pawadi was very sick and had entered the hospital, all rushed together to visit her. They brought grapes, mangosteen, apples, oranges, pineapples, oranges, juices and sweet drinks and presented them to Nang Pawadi, requesting that she recover quickly and have a long life ahead of her with her nieces and nephews and friends.

While Nang Pawadi was still in bed at the Mahosot Hospital<sup>12</sup>, Thaw Somjay took on a maid to look after the housework until his wife recovered. But he noticed that the house, which had always been cleaned and arranged in proper order, became messy. Things were disorderly-not as usual. Thaw Somjay could not endure it, so he gave constructive criticism to the person [the maid] who lacked

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<sup>12</sup>Located in Vientiane, Mahosot is the best hospital in Laos.

the qualities of a housewife.

Nang Pawadi got so sick that she was unconscious for several days. This was counted as the second time she had escaped death. She had been in the hospital for two months already, but she was still unable to sit up. When her husband came to visit, she would pull his shirt and smell it as she had always done in the past and then would tell the niece taking care of her at the hospital, "Payjit, take Uncle's shirt and wash it please. It stinks already."

Concern for her husband and other people was a constant habit for Nang Pawadi, from the time she was still well and strong until she was in so weak a condition that she could not speak. Even when she could not get up, she reminded her husband to ask permission from the doctor for her to return home because she was worried about the housework she had always done. She asked her husband to dine at the "Min Tern" restaurant near the fountain until she was healthy again. She probably thought that she had never been ill at all. This demonstrates for us to see that Nang Pawadi was more worried about others than about herself, as I have mentioned several times already.

## Conclusion

All of this about the attributes of Nang Pawadi says that she was a person with respectful manners, a good housewife who knew how to keep things arranged in good order, who loved and respected her husband as one who respects a father and who accepted staying under



his supervision. She never said or did things that might have annoyed others. She did not infringe on the rights of other people or her next door neighbors. For example, she did not speak so loudly that people could hear beyond the house; she did not nail "bang, bang, bang" [in the house] in the middle of the night. She always said, "You can always look for more money, but it's hard to mend hurt feelings."

Although Nang Pawadi was the wife of an important person of high status, she humbled herself and did not think too highly of herself. She loved the parents and relatives of her husband as her own, and she showed respect for people of every level, regardless of their ethnic, language or religious group. She had a kind and compassionate heart to all of her fellow human beings. Thus we can call her "One Who Lives According to the Dharma," and it is appropriate to uphold her as a superior Lao woman and as a female example for ordinary Lao people.

My goodness! Nang Pawadi was the victim of a sad and pitiable illness. She escaped death twice and still was sick. Will she live to an old age as the life-long partner for Thaw Somjay? A few more months, a few years maybe? We cannot predict for in the end, the Grim Reaper will come and take her when her time is up; the Grim Reaper does not listen to us.